New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"King Lear"

New York Post

January 13, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Orson Welles and His 'King Lear'

The centuries-old debate as to whether the craggy and titanic magnificence of "King Lear" can be properly captured within the limiting confines of the theater remains, so far as I can see, in abeyance today. Last night at the City Center, the fearless and forceful Orson Welles offered his own production of Shakespeare's gigantic and stubbornly elusive masterpiece, and, although it was a brave try, bold and vigorous and, on the whole, clearly spoken, my uncomfortable impression was that the work's stunning quality was realized only intermittently.

What surprised and disappointed me most is that the performance was so rarely exciting. Mr. Welles has certainly had his share of triumphs and troubles in the theater, but one virtue that both his victories and defeats have invariably possessed in common has been an atmosphere of dynamic and exhilarating excitement. It was particularly disconcerting, therefore, to find that his revival of "King Lear" came to vivid and moving dramatic life only at varying intervals, and, despite its vigor of pace, its turbulent emotions seemed curiously lacking in stimulation.

Play and Star

This doesn't mean that it isn't worth the time and attention of those who, as I do, regard "King Lear" as one of the mightiest works of dramatic imagination ever created. I might add that I regard Orson Welles as a fairly mighty work of dramatic imagination, too. All that I can say is that, having as much enthusiasm for both the play and the actor-director as I happen to, I hoped for a considerable theatrical event as the result of their head-on encounter and, instead, found it an evening of hope deferred and valiant efforts but mildly rewarded.

There is no doubt that Mr. Welles is an impressive Lear, mighty of bulk and voice, bold and forthright of manner, and always striking to watch. I thought he began well, too, and, in his first scene, when he hurled his way through a map of Britain to denounce Cordelia, he was not only startlingly effective but gave promise of exciting things to come. After that, he never ceased to be dynamic, but he also never seemed to me deeply moving or thrillingly eloquent in his depiction of the wild pathos of the old king who realizes that he is going mad.

Two Scenes

There is no more touching line in all of Shakespeare than Lear's "I fear I am not in my perfect mind," but I didn't think it had anywhere near its heartbreaking quality as Mr. Welles said it last night. As for the famous scene of the three victims of cruelty battling their way across the heath in the storm, it is no doubt so difficult to do that it is one of the chief reasons why skeptical critics have doubted the play can be properly acted, but it is an episode of tremendous power, and in the current production it emerges as little more than sound and fury.

It is no doubt presumptuous to rearrange Mr. Welles' casting for him, but I can't help thinking it would have been better if those two fine actresses, Geraldine Fitzgerald, who plays Goneril, and Viveca Lindfors, who is Cordelia, had changed roles. John Colicos, as the bitter and vengeful Edmund, has excellent moments, and so have Roy Dean as Kent, Lester Rawlins as Gloucester, and Robert Fletcher as Edgar, but I thought Alvin Epstein was ineffectual as the Fool, and the playing in general was but fairly good. "King Lear" remains the theater's most difficult hazard.

"KING LEAR"

Revival of the tragedy by William Shakespeare; staged by Orson Welles; costumes by Robert Fletcher; settings by Theodore Cooper; presented by the New York City Center Theatre Company (Jean Dalrymple, director) at the City Center, January 12, 1956. The cast:

Lear.....Orson Welles
King of France..Robert Blackburn
Duke of Burgundy..Walter Mathews
Duke of Albany...Sorrell Brooke
Duke of Cornwall..Thayer David
Earl of Kent.....Roy Dean
Earl of Gloucester..Lester Rawlins
Edgar.....Robert Fletcher
Edmund.....John Colicos
Lear's fool.....Alvin Epstein
Curan.....Tom Clancy
Oswald.....Francis Carpenter
Old man.....Jack Aronson
Servant to Cornwall..Robert Burr
Doctor.....Walter Mathews
Goneril....Geraldine Fitzgerald
Regan.....Sylvia Short
Cordelia.....Viveca Lindfors

The New York Times

January 13, 1956

Theatre: Orson Welles' 'King Lear'

Production Is Staged At City Center

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO judge by the "King Lear" that opened at the City Center last evening, Orson Welles has more genius than talent.

As a theatrical conception, his production is massive and resonant. Taking Shakespeare's most titanic poem more or less as it was written, Mr. Welles has made full use of the huge City Center stage by mounting an enormous show. It goes straight through the evening without an intermission, from Lear's fanatical renunciation of his kingdom in the first scene to the death of a beaten old man in the last.

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In all his capacities, Mr. Welles interprets the drama in epochal style. His baleful scenery uses space boldly. The performance is always in motion; the actors rush across the stage in groups; the vocal tones are big and full. One of Mr. Welles' virtues is that he is theatrical. He likes a stirring show.

Made up with a wild wig and beard, in a gold first-act costume that has tremendous width, he plays Lear like a man out of a medieval epic. Having recently suffered an ankle injury, Mr. Welles was none too steady on his feet last evening. But it would be difficult to tell what was infirmity and what was interpretation. For his Lear is a figure of fury, in which the scene on the heath is not much more violent than Lear in general, cursing his daughters, roaring at fate.

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Since Shakespeare is usually played with gentility, Mr. Welles' point of view is a move in the right direction, toward a freeing of forms. But this is the point where the talent seems to be lacking. For Mr. Welles does not get inside the character of Lear, nor does his production get into the heart of the poem. His reverberant style of speaking, usually at the top of his voice, has the effect of throwing the lines away; and he also breaks the lines whimsically as though he were not much interested in their meaning.

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His roaring approach is dramatic in the first scene. Lear commanding his daughters to express their love for him, Lear turning angrily on the one daughter who loves him—this is expressed with power and also with perceptive character delineation. But by the time Lear gets to the heath, Mr. Welles seems to have lost interest in this stubborn, pathetic old man; and his acting lacks feeling.

As far as characterization is concerned, some of the other actors are more responsive than he is. John Calicos' malign Edmund and Roy Dean's uncompromising Kent are human beings with individual points of view. As Goneril and Regan, respectively, Geraldine Fitzgerald and Sylvia Short play with admirable spirit. Although Viveca Lindfors' Cordelia is lovely and full of grace, it is impossible to overlook her accent, which is a blemish in a play written in English verse.

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Alvin Epstein's Fool, directed as a savage comment on the drama, is excellent and an enlightened solution to the problem of fools in Shakespeare. There are good performances also by Lester Rawlins as Gloucester, Francis Carpenter as Oswald, Robert Blackburn as the King of France, Thayer David as Cornwall and Robert Fletcher as Edgar.

Marc Blitzstein, no doubt following instructions, has composed an elaborate and thoroughly original musical score that has the unfortunate effect of masking the dialogue now and then. Although it contributes to the excitement, it also overwhelms some of Shakespeare's most terrifying verse.

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Mr. Welles has a genius for the theatre. It is fine to have him back again; and it is easy to appreciate the robustness of his attack on the problems of staging a fiery, Elizabethan drama. But the attack has left Shakespeare prostrate. Mr. Welles' talent does not equal his genius.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 13, 1956

'King Lear' Brings Back Welles

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Orson Welles does neither himself nor the City Center a great favor with his return to the local scene in "King Lear."

The production is so choked with effects, few of which come off, that it is difficult even to follow the story. The acting styles are disparate, and the performing itself is often mediocre.

Mr. Welles himself fails to establish the two indispensable qualities of the King—majesty and sympathy—at the very start. Without them the entire significance of the story is lost.

Mad Scene.

The star is striking in the scene where Lear goes mad, but like most of his other scenes it is played so slowly, with such grandiloquent pauses, that one is relieved when it is over.

The tragedy is done without intermission. This plan might be permissable if the drama had an uninterrupted sweep. Such is not the case, and two hours and 20 minutes is a long, long time.

The scenery conceived by the star is often effective, more often overpowering.

Supporting Cast.

Supporting Mr. Welles, and billed as costars, are Viveca Lindfors as Cordelia, and Geraldine Fitzgerald as Goneril. Miss Lindfors gives the good sister more than her accustomed force, as well as her due tenderness. It is a graceful performance.

Miss Fitzgerald is a mad and elegant villainess who turns virago with a grand flourish when her behavior comes into the open. Sylvia Short is her greedy image, and portrays evil with a terrifying efficiency.

Lester Rawlins makes an earnest Gloucester, and adds to the chilling effect of the play's best scene, when he has his eyes put out. As Edmund, head trouble maker, John Colicos plays with alert and birdlike surveys of the audience.

As Kent, Roy Dean gives the play its cleanest performance, authoritative, swift and vital. He is almost the only person in the company who seems absolutely sure of what he is doing.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 13, 1956

THEATER

'King Lear'

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE are two scenes in Orson Welles' spectacular new production of "King Lear" that seem to me to sum the project up. One is that introductory quarrel in which the fatuous and hot-tempered old man divides his kingdom. Here Mr. Welles, letting his lip curl slyly behind a story-book beard, has his faithful retainers unroll an enormous map, a map large enough to walk on. Mr. Welles does walk on it, as he apportions the land to those scoundrels, Regan and Goneril. More than that. As he begs Cordelia for a loving word, the map is stretched taut and tempting across his breast, only beard and eyes glowering above it. Then, when Cordelia has stuck to her guns, he charges right through it, splitting Britain open like a paper-hoop in a three-ring circus. And when he has finished lashing his daughter with his tongue, he slashes at her with the remnants of the map.

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The second thoroughly characteristic item is the roaring scene on the heath. Here Welles bathes his own perplexed and perspiring mask in a deep blue spotlight, the while his Fool—looking like a donkey-eared Pinnochio—stares up into a green one, and violent flashes of pure white streak the ruined arches and pitted windows behind them. Now, as the King carefully pronounces "I am more sinned against than sinning," the Fool begins to sing an interpolated "Hi, ho, the wind and the rain" in lunatic counterpoint.

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These elaborate, studied, wildly calculated effects are, in one sense, the best things in the show. In another and more serious sense, they are also the worst. They are, to begin with, bold, colorful, eminently theatrical. Wherever Welles turns on the City Center stage he is—as director, as actor, and apparently as scene designer—prepared to scrawl rich visual diagrams for the delectation of the customers. When he knights a man, he does it with a giant blade. When a feast is being prepared, a hung stag is hustled swiftly into view. When Lear enters it is with a hooded falcon on his arm, and when he is angry it is with a fury fierce enough to send a throne crashing down a flight of stairs. There is no mincing the business of Gloucester's gouged eyes: when they come out, they come out at the floodlights, and when the deed is done the sockets are red, glistening liquid pools.

But every effect is a bequest of Mr. Welles' inventive, but much too conniving, mind. His heart seems to have nothing to say. If Lear goes mad, it is with a dozen little plans: a plan for crying like a baby at one stage, howling like a drunkard at another, simpering like a carefully observed case-study in senility at a third. There is nowhere an emotional line. Lear does not revolt us, then catch our sympathies unaware, then break our hearts. He sounds a bass-note at regular intervals, pauses metronomically, varies from blast to whimper on a prearranged schedule.

The result is an intelligent automaton at center stage. And, in managing the other people who swirl around him, he has achieved something of the same hard-driving monotony. All of the lines are read in a clear, heroic, declamatory style. And all of them are divested of feeling, of intimacy, of direct personality.

Viveca Lindfors' Cordelia is sometimes tremulous, sometimes serene, but never really touching. Geraldine Fitzgerald's Goneril is a regal chess-piece from "Alice in Wonderland," handsome, ringing and finally mechanical.

John Colicos' black-garbed, cruelly playful Edmund has some interesting highlighting to it: his dying screech, "Yet Edmund was loved!" tells us something fresh and unfamiliar about the role.

Yet Mr. Colicos, together with a musical-comedy Edgar and a stock-company Gloucester, is whipped about the environs with so much clockwork force and at such a pistol-shot pitch that all character-lines blur and emotion finds no room for a foothold. I thought only Roy Dean, as the Earl of Kent, succeeded in riding out the tempest without loss of identity.

Mr. Welles' titanic settings—red and gray towers, arching ladders, a rolling pyramid of primitive stonework—are striking in themselves. Yet for all the blazing pageantry that occupies the City Center stage, and for all the occasional brilliance of its direction, "King Lear" stands cold as a monument on that windy heath.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
January 13, 1956

Welles Plays 'Lear' for Keeps in Spirited City Center Production

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Late in the last century a Denver newspaper man, Eugene Field, covered a performance of "King Lear," and, not caring particularly for the work of the actor in the leading role, wrote, "Soandso played the King as though he were afraid somebody else would play the Ace." I can assure you that in last evening's new production of "Lear" at the City Center, Orson Welles is not so timorous. He is every inch a king and he lets everybody know it. Some of the time in the early part of last evening I was wishing that he and his fellow players would stop yelling and let Shakespeare get a word in, but the concluding moments of the tragedy were satisfyingly touching.

Welles has chosen to stage "Lear" as a headlong melodrama in one act, with the pace he once gave to a memorable modern-dress production of "Julius Caesar." (In 1953 he did a TV version of the play in 73 minutes for Omnibus, and last evening he was not far short of this time.)

Playing for Keeps.

The City Center's "Lear" is staged on a mobile collection of ramps, steps and platforms, with a few effectively designed backdrops — the work of Theodore Cooper. The lighting, as it shifts from scene to scene and mood to mood, is admirable, and last evening it was quite a masterpiece of timing. During a rehearsal on these steps and ramps Welles broke an ankle, but this mishap was a minor one to a theatrical man of Orson's calibre.

He didn't act like a cripple last evening. He played "Lear" for everything he had—and what Welles has is considerable. He has a voice which is fabulous in range and utterly indestructible, and he also has a fine respect for English. He makes certain that it is understood.

There is a devoted, agile and occasionally able company supporting Welles—Geraldine Fitzgerald as Goneril, Viveca Lindfors as Cordelia, Sylvia Short as Regan, Lester Rawlins as Gloucester, Robert Fletcher as Edgar, John Colicos as Edmund and Alvin Epstein as Lear's fool. My own admiration goes mainly to the relatively gentle work of Miss Lindfors and Mr. Rawlins.

Different Lears

"King Lear" has always been a baffling play, so there are as many ways of portraying the monarch as there are actors. Welles' Lear is magnificent in voice and stature, and Welles is clearly convinced that the old man really was crazy. The best Lear in my memory is the one played five years ago by Louis Calhern, who seemed to think that the old fellow was not any farther out of his mind than the rest of us are.

It is a fine thing for the City Center to bring us such a spectacular and devotedly done production of a great poetic tragedy. I urge you all to see it—and make up your own minds about it afterward. It is stimulating enough so that you will have to make up your own mind, and this is the greatest pleasure of playgoing.

Journal-American
January 13, 1956

Orson Plays Powerful Role

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN MY BOOK, "King Lear" always has been Shakespeare's most baffling tragedy. If one is to cut through the avalanche of majestic speech and expostulation he is apt come face to face with the fact that the play is about a tyrannical and sadistic old megalomaniac who has made a shambles of his own life and those of everyone near and dear to him. If he eventually winds up behind the eight ball—it's exactly where he belongs; he had it coming to him.

There have been various efforts through the years, by scores of Lears, to bring some understanding to the role of the aged King and last night, at the City Center, Orson Welles made his pitch at the part. Let it be recorded that whatever else it was—it was not lacking in power.

For it appears that Mr. Welles has chosen, perhaps wisely, by the sheer dominance of his presence and voice to project the character of mixed-up monarch to the corner seat in the last balcony.

Vigor Helps

He is not concerned with extracting sympathy from the audience; he takes charge with such vigor and authority that you are held motionless in your seat. He doesn't ask you to like the guy, but he will defy you not to be interested in him.

There are many things to be said in favor of this interpretation: the performance is so powerful that one rarely stops to examine the many inconsistencies in character delineation.

Production-wise he has aquitted himself nobly. Playing the whole show in one act, with no intermission and only unnoticeable deletions, he has contrived to use his supernumeraries to move various bits of scenery about in a manner which never stops the action, yet gives a quite gratifying effect of changing locale. The lights are handled with deftness and there are helpful effects from an organ and occasional background music by Marc Blitzstein.

His large supporting company is generally brilliant. Outstanding, I thought, were the efforts of Sorrell Brooke, as Albany; Thayer Davis as Cornwall; Roy Dean, as Kent; Robert Fletcher as Edgar; Lester Rawlins, as Gloucester and John Colicos as Edmund.

On the distaff side Geraldine Fitzgerald is an unexpected though beguiling Goneril; Sylvia Short, a suitably relentless Regan, but although highly decorative, I found Viveca Lindfors difficult to understand in the role of Cordelia. Maybe I had by then become slightly deafened by Mr. Wells' bellowings during the "mad" scene, and anything short of a piercing screech sounded like a whisper.

One of the pitfalls of many Lears is the fact that the actor is unable to project his voice above the sound of the storm in the moments when he is having his little hiatus with the elements.

But not our boy Orson. The lightning flashes, the wind howls and strong men backstage beat heavily on the thunder apparatus—but onstage Mr. Welles moves forward, takes a deep breath and the synthetic noises pale into oblivion.

There have been more subtle Lears in our time (Michael Redgrave, for example), but I doubt if there's ever been an equally overwhelming one. You must not go along with this one all the way but, by Jupiter, you won't be bored.

"The Great Sebastians"

Daily Mirror
January 5, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Great Sebastians' A Top Notch Comedy

• Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne sweep triumphantly back to B'way.

The great Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne swept triumphantly back to Broadway Wednesday evening in "The Great Sebastians." Their newest vehicle, provided for them by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, fits as neatly as a glove from London's St. James Street.

• • •

THE ANTA'S NEW occupant is a melodramatic comedy about a mind-reading act, caught by the Communists in Czechoslovakia the day Masaryk was killed. The husband is a patriotic Czech, and the wife an equally patriotic subject of Britain.

Threatened with prison unless they collaborate with the Reds in a fictitious story about the statesman's passing, they gallantly thumb their noses at the usurpers. And if you want to know exactly how they outwit them, you'll have to pay a visit to the ANTA.

In the good old days, Alfred Lunt was a steady patron of the Palace. He loves vaudeville, which probably explains the zest with which he and Miss Fontanne impersonate a pair of egotistical mental fakers, with their hearts in the right place. Their performances are both irresistably accurate and delightfully satiric.

They are proud of their profession, make no mistake about it. They wrangle over codes and bows, know how to get everything that's coming to them from an agent or theatre manager, and can introduce "Fink's Mules," on the same bill, with finesse. They are lovable hams, radiating nostalgia for a vanished era.

• • •

IF WE WERE playing one of those parlor games and asked to supply a synonym for theatre, we'd just jot down Lunt and Fontanne on our pad. For they spell THEATRE in capital letters. Their sense of timing is superb. The buoyance with which they approach a scene lifts an audience right out of its seats.

An eminent director once asked an applicant for a job to do a startling thing. He would turn his back to the stage, out front, and the actor was to make him feel his presence on the boards. Sounds impossible, doesn't it? But the magnificent Lunts could turn that trick without turning a hair. They could even read the alphabet, and make it sound like an absorbing saga.

Bretaigne Windust has staged the frolic with an eye to suspense and pace. Raymond Sovey has designed handsome settings. Ben Astar and Simon Oakland, along with a couple of dozen other good players, lend the Lunts admirable support.

BUT IT IS Lunt and Fontanne who are the show. They romp through the Lindsay and Crouse melodramatics and laughs with such effortless style and grace as to stir you to spontaneous applause. They are real champs; exponents of a fine tradition, which they hold in high esteem.

"The Great Sebastians" is great entertainment. It's packed with sentiment, chuckles and skill. It's a sparkling display of virtuosity, something we get too seldom in the showshops these nights. Put it at the top of your "must see" list.

"THE GREAT SEBASTIANS"

Melodramatic comedy in three acts and four scenes by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse; staged by Bretaigne Windust; settings by Raymond Sovey; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; presented by Messrs. Lindsay and Crouse at the ANTA Theatre; January 4, 1956. The cast:

Essie Sebastian..Lynn Fontanne
Rudi Sebastian.....Alfred Lunt
Manya.....Susan Frank
Mirko.....Burns Oliver
Security Policeman.....
Martin Brandt
Josef.....Arny Freeman
Sergeant Javorski..Simon Oakland
Gen. Otokar Zandek...Ben Astar
First Soldier.....Peter Gumeny
Second Soldier....Michael Egan
Vlasta Habova.....Peg Murray
Sophie Cerny.....Eugenia Rawls
Col. Bradacova...Anne Francine
Third Soldier...Sheppard Kerman
Karel Cerny.....Jose Ruben
Novotny.....Grant Gordon
Paviat.....Ben Hammer
Dr. Balzar.....Edward Moor
Marie Balzar.....Doris Fesette
Bacilek.....Joseph Holland
Corporal.....Ted Gunther

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
January 5, 1956

Lunt, Fontanne, Lindsay, Crouse Hit Jackpot in 'Great Sebastians'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Four people—two playwrights and two actors—are the principals involved in "The Great Sebastians," which had its premiere at the ANTA Theatre last evening. These four are all aces, being Russel Crouse, Howard Lindsay, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, so theirs is an unbeatable winning hand in the tricky gamble of show business. You can't go wrong on a seat at the ANTA. Last evening's opening was the poshest of the season, and it has been a long time since I have seen so much new fur under old hair.

The comedy is an artfully deliberate combination of the legends of Graustark and the writings of George Sokolsky. In it, Lunt and Fontanne are a vaudeville combo doing a mind-reading act, and their bookings have carried them as far as Prague, Czechoslovakia, in late 1948. They are just in time for the upsurge of the communists and the purported suicide of Jan Masaryk, and for a pleasant while it looks as though they'd never get out of Prague alive. But Lindsay and Crouse are no men to leave Lunt and Fontanne in the lurch, and I can assure you, without giving away one damn bit of the plot, that L & F make a miraculous escape in the nick of curtain time.

Fine for Lunts

Once in a while "The Great Sebastians" pretends to be serious, but most of the time it gets down to the more serious business of being a first-class comedy for the lustrous Lunts. It has been a long time since these two great comedians have had a play good enough for them to be in, and "Sebastians" is it. They have found a pair of authors who can keep them bouncing, and the result is a charming, winsome comedy—produced in high style, incidently by the authors themselves.

The real name of the Great Sebastians is Schluep, pronounced Shlup. He is a Czech and she is probably a cockney. They are playing a variety act in Prague and then they get invited to do their mind reading bit at a party at the home of an important general. In the general's house they run into more intrigue than you could find in two days and nights of TV, but they outwit everybody except the audience.

With Lunt and Fontanne acting, who wants to be outwitted? I'd much rather just sit on my ANTA chair and watch and listen to these two. I'd rather hear Miss Fontanne query, helplessly, "Is there such a thing as the subconscious mind?" or watch Lunt pop his eyes and declaim in a phony Czech accent. I'd rather see them quarreling delicately over a plate of food—and the heck or the Czech with the plot.

Miss Fontanne looks wonderful in a blonde wig with a curl in the middle of her forehead. Mr. Lunt is quite a figure, particularly in the opening scene, when he strolls among the audience and prompts his lady in her mind-reading act. The comedy is handsomely set by Raymond Sovey, deftly directed by Bretaigne Windust, and populated with a lot of actors. It is a pleasant novelty to see a lot of actors these days, for most plays are limited to a cast of five and one of them is the maid.

New York Post

January 5, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Lunts Take on the Czech Reds

A playgoer has a sense of comforting security when Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne are around. You know that they are going to be radiant and delightful in whatever they do, revealing an easy and joyous dexterity of craftsmanship and a wonderful relish in acting for acting's sake, and it doesn't matter tremendously what their dramatic vehicle may be. But when the vehicle happens to be as admirably built to order for them as is "The Great Sebastians," in which they opened last night at the ANTA Theater, this sense of audience well-being is especially justified.

The "melodramatic comedy" which Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse have constructed for their current use is, indeed, rather more an idea for two characterizations than a fully developed play, but the idea happens to be just right for them. Set the Lunts down in the Czechoslovakia of 1948, at the time of the Communist coup and the death of Masaryk, as a couple of international vaudeville mind-readers, somehow enmeshed in the Red intrigues of the period, and you'll realize that the commissars and the collaborators are in for an evening of defeat.

How they got into their mess, with their summoning to do the mind-reading act at a party given by a Red general and the discovery that they had lunched with Jan Masaryk on the day of his death, is of secondary importance. So, in fact, is the slightly involved manner in which they vanquish their enemies and get away. What is important is that the story supplies an ideal framework for all the comic guile and gay skulduggery of which these two superb players are capable, and that they have never performed with more hilarious gusto than they do here.

They also manage to be oddly touching on several occasions. Chiefly, they are magnificently comic, but the sight of the two self-centered vaudevillians, who are not always too sure of their own mind-reading trickery, have no knowledge of anything save show business and just want to get peacefully back to England for their next engagement, fighting back when they find themselves trapped in a political conspiracy, has its moving moments, and the Lunts take advantage of them with all the skill of two fine actors who are masters of every aspect of their art.

With their customary impish humor, the authors have opened their play with the Great Sebastians finishing their vaudeville act and, as an encore, sending Mr. Lunt into the audience to cue Miss Fontanne in the bogus mind-reading. Naturally, he has to select various playgoers as his subjects and, last evening, the first-nighters were treated—although that's hardly the right word—to a sight future spectators will be spared. For it was their brilliant conception to use this reviewer in the act, with particular references to his concern with Ireland and China. It's indulging in understatement to say I showed signs of needing a few rehearsals.

While "The Great Sebastians" is entirely the Lunts' show, and the other actors haven't many opportunities, the supporting cast, with the conceivable exception of your reviewer, proved an excellent one. The best opportunities go to Ben Astar as the Communist general, Simon Oakland as a sergeant who is other than he first seems, and Arny Freeman as an unhappy theater manager. But the Lunts are everything. They are always a joy and they have rarely been in finer form. In their incomparable hands, a fine vehicle becomes a delightful show.

Journal-American

January 5, 1956

Lunts Again Provide A Delightful Evening

Perennial Stars Make the Most Of Lindsay and Crouse Comedy

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE LUNTS, Alfred and Lynn, unchanged and indestructable through the years, came back to town last night in a new comedy melodrama by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse called "The Great Sebastians." It was received with warmth and enthusiasm by a plush gathering at the ANTA Theatre and will probably be around these environs as long as the principals wish to tarry. It is a delightful evening.

One sees the Lunts through the seasons in their vast portfolio of whimsy, intrigue, heart-break and pathos, and the prospect of reviewing their efforts becomes more and more a hollow chore. They seemed to have arrived at a peak of perfection that rises above their material; sometimes they're better than good, but they're never bad. They have practically solved the riddle of the theatre business.

It struck me that last night's offering fell in an in-between bracket—better than "Quadrille," for instance, but not up to the serious standards of their Shaws and Sherwoods. The play itself is a rather flimsy charade, but it gives them plenty to do, there is an ample quota of comedy and, of course, they bring exquisite delight from moments that are little more than stage directions in the script.

It would be interesting to see how this comedy would emerge when presented by the senior class at Tenafly High; it would be doubtful if the parents remained for the final curtain.

For Lindsay and Crouse seem to have had trouble parlaying their single idea into three acts. The Sebastians, a mind-reading act are playing Communist Prague in 1948 and are summoned to give an informal performance at the home of a general on the night of their scheduled departure.

When word is flashed at the party that Jan Masaryk has committed suicide they are ordered by a commissar to sign a press release stating that they had lunch with him and heard him say that he was despondent because he had failed to fulfill himself in the people's party.

Solid Support

Well, all that part of the evening is a big bore. But when the Lunts are reading minds and otherwise clowning, they are superb; Lynn revealing a delicious cockney accent, and Alfred reverting to that familiar middle-European dialect that has served him so faithfully before.

In support they are brilliantly abetted by such solid conspirators as Ben Astar (our best Soviet heavy these days), Simon Oakland, Arny Freeman, Joseph Holland, Eugenia Rawls, Jose Ruben and Anne Francine.

It is difficult to determine how much anybody actually directs the Lunts, but at least Bretaigne Windust has done an apparently capable and unobtrusive job with this one. The settings by Raymond Sovey are bright and tasteful and Miss Fontanne is dreamily gowned by Mainbocher.

"The Great Sebastians" really ought to be better; but the Lunts couldn't be.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 5, 1956

Lunt, Fontanne Do It Again

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It seems many a long year since the Lunts and their fans have had such a high time as they do with "The Great Sebastians" at the ANTA.

Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse have tailored the stars a form-fitting vehicle, which resounds with humor and bursts with action. They impersonate a music hall mind-reading act, involved with the Communists in Prague on the day of Masaryk's death.

They have lunched with the great patriot. The party would like them to sign a fanciful statement proving he committed suicide.

Into Their Own.

It is with this climax that the characters, so ingeniously and gaily created, come into their own.

Miss Fontanne, a waspish Cockney of vaudevillian elegance, reveals herself as gallant and brave. She is human and firm, as well as testy. Nobody can make her sign lies to be attributed to a sweet man who had been her friend.

And Mr. Lunt, all florid chicanery and footlight manner, suddenly melts into a desperate man to whom a fine gesture is more important than clever tricks.

Funny and Swift.

In the end it is their ingenious deftness at stage magic which guarantees their escape, just as things look darkest.

The play is funny and swift, blooming with the most expert craftsmanship imaginable.

The stars are the whole show, just as every customer wants it. They are only offstage long enough to prepare for grand entrances. Then, incomparably, they walk on, bathed in glamour and the ever-shocking beauty of Miss Fontanne, always with the added glint that tells you they know how funny it is to be so dignified.

Single-Minded, Traditional.

Much of the melodrama's life springs from the principal characters' single-minded, traditional and quite vain devotion to their profession, and their belief in their own importance.

Lunt endures a rage of jealousy when Fontanne compares him with her first partner of 20 years before. When officials insist that their real name is Schlupp, instead of Sebastian, their agony is past humiliation.

There is much talk of the code by which Lunt indicates to Fontanne the objects he wants her to identify. They have adopted a new list of key words, at his insistance, and the change is painfully embarrassing to her.

Fine Supporting Cast.

The show opens with the stars actually doing a bit of the act. Last night practically every member of the audience was easily identifiable, so the stunt was not too difficult. But apparently the Lunts can really make it work on strangers, too.

There is a first-rate supporting cast, headed by Ben Astar as a general with insecure loyalties, and Simon Oakland as a two-faced sergeant.

But it is the genius of the Lunts, whipping along through an expert script, that makes this an evening of joy and gladness.

The New York Times

January 5, 1956

Theatre: The Lunts in Dullish Play

Seen at the ANTA in 'Great Sebastians'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AS usual the Lunts are giving a bright performance in a dullish play.

Billed as "a melodramatic comedy," the play is "The Great Sebastians," by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse. It opened at the ANTA Theatre last evening. According to the authors, the Great Sebastians are a celebrated mind-reading act in European vaudeville theatres.

In the first scene, Miss Fontanne is on the stage in garish show attire with a black band around her eyes. And Mr. Lunt, flamboyantly professional, is down in the auditorium selecting objects she can identify. Among the objects he selected last evening was Richard Watts Jr., drama critic of The New York Post. Miss Fontanne not only identified him, but also read his mind, fortunately discovering nothing in it unsuited for public hearing.

The first scene is a wonderful bit of Lunt and Fontanne fooling. Being the most gifted comedy actors we have, they naturally love to imitate vaudeville hams and revel in the most elementary buncombe of the business—florid gestures, cocky strutting, shrewd behavior at the wings when they are milking the audience for more applause. Years ago they did something of this sort in "Idiot's Delight" to vast satisfaction among the citizenry. They have lost none of their sardonic gusto in the first scene of "The Great Sebastians."

For the next hour they struggle manfully with an inert drama. The authors are scheming to involve the Sebastians in a sinister plot behind the Iron Curtain on the day of Jan Masaryk's death. Since the Sebastians are supposed to be playing a variety house in Prague, they are already in the right country. But the job of enmeshing them in a Communist plot requires more hocus-pocus on the part of the authors than the team

Portray Mind-Reading Act in Vaudeville

of Lunt & Fontanne has to squander on its mind-reading act.

There is one aspect of the cold war that has not been sufficiently understood. Anything to do with the Communists is not only devious but also boring. In the last act of "The Great Sebastians" the authors manage to contrive some merchantable melodrama, showing how two vaudeville actors outwit the security police of Czechoslovakia. Good! But it is hardly sufficient compensation for the labored preparation for this scene and for the heavy boredom that hangs over the Communist social gathering in the ornate home of Gen. Otokar Zandek.

Able troupers in good standing, Mr. Lunt and Miss Fontanne are not depressed by the languors of the middle portions of the script. Mr. Lunt gives a gay and droll performance that is full of amusing details. And Miss Fontanne, reverting to the accent of Eliza Doolittle in "Pygmalion," complements her husband's performance with some vaudeville mummery that is equally ironic and entertaining. Everything they do is meticulous, pertinent, fluent and funny.

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Under Bretaigne Windust's direction, the performance is suave and efficient. Raymond Sovey has provided suitable scenery for on-stage, backstage and in the Communists' parlor, and Jean Rosenthal has lighted the sets to make them look real.

As the most rigid and bombastic of the Communists, Ben Astar is even ruder and noisier than he was in a similar part in "The Prescott Proposals." Again, the performance is effective. Susan Frank, Arny Freeman, Simon Oakland and José Ruben play subordinate parts agreeably.

But "The Great Sebastians" is another holiday for the great team of Lunt & Fontanne. From that point of view, it is no doubt acceptable. But golly, what they could do if they selected a script as subtle and skilful as they are! For instance, something written with literary distinction.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
January 5, 1956

THEATER

'The Great Sebastians'

By WALTER F. KERR

"I KNOW we've done a bit of hanky-panky in our time!" cries a blonde Lynn Fontanne, slapping a table with a resounding palm and tilting her fetchingly pointed chin in the troubled Czechoslovakian air. And hanky-panky it is at the Anta Playhouse—pretty good hanky-panky quite a lot of the time but deep-dyed charlatanry at the core.

In their romantic tour of contemporary politics it has now amused playwrights Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse to stop off in Prague—along about 1948—and watch a couple of third-rate vaudevillians hoodwink the whole Russian army.

Alfred Lunt and the aforesaid Miss Fontanne are "The Great Sebastians," a team of not-quite accomplished mind-readers who would like to get out of the suddenly communized country with their salaries intact. As the fabulous partners stash their hidden savings—transformed into a valuable postage stamp for purposes of export—into handy compacts or even handier cigarette packages, or again as they try to transfix a hotbed of political higher-ups with their dubious theatrical talents, they are in themselves gloriously entertaining.

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Watch Mr. Lunt, for instance, burble helplessly and wistfully as he tries to weasel a bit of sorely needed information out of a stiff-necked local sergeant. I don't know that he's ever done a single bit of passing business better. Or keep an eye on him as he mesmerizes a buffalo-type general with the secret of turning lead into gold, treats a suspect telephone as though it were a red-hot stove, and brags genially about breaking the house record at the Palladium the week Danny Kaye happened to be playing there. It's necromancy, all right.

And there is never, of course, any problem about keeping an eye on Miss Fontanne. The Bird of Paradise needs no spotlight. With her hair drawn tight behind her ears and her radar eyelashes sweeping the area for storm warnings, she is Cockney confidence itself. Trapped behind barred doors for a nervous evening, she tucks a napkin into her Mainbocher gown, deftly spears away a hefty slice of her husband's dinner, and coolly mocks a bully with a haughty "We're ever so frightened" in superb disdain.

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Indeed, whenever "The Great Sebastians" are living beyond their—and the play's—means, things go swimmingly. The outright hocus-pocus, and the air of genteel spoof, is always engaging. If the harried refugees are staggering back from the discovery that their mind-reading plans have gone wildly awry, or if they are sneaking down a gilded staircase on tiptoe, the feeling of amiable skullduggery and tongue-in-cheek thrill keeps the evening nonsenically alive.

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It is when the Messrs. Lindsay and Crouse pull an unexpectedly straight face that the act is in trouble. The vaudeville team, it appears, have been quite close friends of the late Jan Masaryk. They have, in fact, had a cozy lunch with him on the very day of his demise. And they are now at the center of what amounts to an international conspiracy to discredit him. (At one point Miss Fontanne must grapple with two dark-coated thugs the while Mr. Lunt is handcuffed to an iron grill.)

Since the authors have written most of the play in a broad, barefaced, close-to-farce style ("That night I didn't sleep for two nights") there has been insufficient character preparation—insufficient working in depth—to make such sobriety plausible. It's a little as though an outright musical comedy had paused to pay tribute to the victims of Lidice, or something, and a rowdy jest becomes paper-thin serious in the switch. It's true, by the way, that after each of these little nods to the weightier issues of our time the jocularly inventive playwrights come up with a face-saving comic twist—and the last comic twist is the best. Still, there's that nagging sense of having been had—and "The Great Sebastians" is rewarding only when it means to be frivolous.

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Raymond Sovey's sets—especially the red-plush opera drop against which the evening begins, and the green-and-gold living room in which it ends—are at once handsome and amusing. Director Bretaigne Windust has jockeyed a large and busy company ingeniously about the stage—there's a tendency to vocal blasting that might be curbed—and agreeable secondary performances come from Ben Astar, Simon Oakland, Peg Murray, and Eugenia Rawls.

Lindsay and Crouse have given the Lunts something livelier than "Quadrille," and that's a noble thing to have done. If only they'd stayed lively, it might have been an outright joy.